

From Civil Rights to the Post-racial Lie: The Representation of Racial Politics in the American Horror Film Score

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Horror has long been one of film's most popular narrative genres, with many of its tropes that we may now consider cliché, such as vampires, demons, and skeletons, appearing as early as 1898 in Georges Méliès's *Le Manoir du Diable*. The silent era saw a rise in the popularity of the horror film and, while technology did not yet allow for these films to feature a synchronised score, many horror film scores are today recognised as among the greatest and most effective of all time.¹ Despite their influence and popularity, and the litany of film music scholarship more broadly, one aspect of such scores that remains comparatively underresearched is how—or indeed, if—they can reflect a film's underlying critical commentary: its subtext.

Perhaps the most apt description of film music for my purposes comes from Mark Slobin, who claims that 'every film is ethnographic, and every soundtrack acts like an ethnomusicologist.'² Here, Slobin argues that a film's soundtrack is representative of the section of society being depicted and could therefore potentially provide commentary on the cultural

¹ For example, in recent polls the American Film Institute listed Bernard Herrmann's score for Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) as the fourth and John Williams's score for Steven Spielberg's *Jaws* (1975) as the sixth greatest scores, while a similar poll saw *Pitchfork* name the scores for Jonathan Glazer's *Under the Skin* (2013), *Psycho*, and John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978) as second, eighth, and tenth, respectively. See 'AFI's 100 Years of Film Scores: The 25 Greatest Film Scores of All Time,' *American Film Institute*, www.afi.com/afis-100-years-of-film-scores; 'The 50 Best Movie Scores of All Time,' *Pitchfork*, 21 Feb. 2019, pitchfork.com/features/lists-and-guides/the-50-best-movie-scores-of-all-time.

² Mark Slobin, 'The Steiner Superculture,' in *Global Soundtracks: Worlds of Film Music*, ed. Mark Slobin (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), 3–4.

conflicts onscreen. Georgina Born adds to this, asserting that ‘music has a formative role in the construction, negotiation and transformation of sociocultural identities,’ thereby suggesting that rather than simply *representing* identity, music can actually come to *define* it.³ Using these arguments, discussions of film music can focus on how film scores can be interpreted as furthering a film’s underlying social commentary.

A film’s subtext can perhaps most simplistically be understood as its true meaning: what is *implicitly* suggested by the film’s *explicit* narrative (or ‘text’). As Robert McKee outlines, while a film’s text includes ‘the images onscreen and the soundtrack of dialogue, music, and sound effects,’ the subtext ‘is the life under that surface—thoughts and feeling both known and unknown, hidden by behaviour.’⁴ The representation of subtext is often merely *suggested* by the actions onscreen and may sometimes appear contrary to the film’s literal narrative. British film critic Mark Kermode, for example, has often posited the seemingly paradoxical argument that *Jaws* (1975) is not, in fact, *about* a shark, while McKee further exacerbates this point by quoting a Hollywood adage: ‘if the scene is about what the scene is about, you’re in deep shit.’⁵ In a similar vein to subtext, a film’s theme can also be used to subtly imply what a film is ‘really’ about; however, for the purposes of this article, I will not attempt to outline the discrepancies between the two terms, and will instead focus my attention on the subtext of the films discussed.

While the history of horror may be littered with many recurring, ‘clichéd’ traits, it has long been a genre with much to say about the wider cultural landscape. Brian Fanelli, for example, has argued the case for horror films of the 1920s and ‘30s as being notably progressive in their depiction of female sexuality and empowerment, while other more contemporary films have implicitly addressed issues such as consumerism (George A. Romero’s *Dawn of the Dead*, 1978; John Carpenter’s *They Live*, 1988); classism (Brian Yuzna’s *Society*, 1989; James DeMonaco’s *The Purge*, 2013); and feminism (David Robert Mitchell’s *It Follows*, 2014; Julia Ducournau’s *Raw*, 2016).⁶ Furthermore, film critic Robin Wood posited horror film as ‘arguably the most progressive’ of film genres, both due to its attitude towards sexuality and the often-failed defeat of horror antagonists, for example Michael Myers (John Carpenter’s *Halloween*, 1978) and Leatherface (Tobe Hooper’s *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, 1974), which suggests a refusal to submit to the homogenous, heteronormative society these villains threatened.⁷

Despite such suppositions by Fanelli and Wood, and the range of socio-political topics explored within the genre, one trope that has remained a problematic constant is the abundance

³ Georgina Born, ‘Music and the Representation/Articulation of Sociocultural Identities,’ in *Western Music and Its Others: Difference, Representation and Appropriation in Music*, ed. Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 31.

⁴ Robert McKee, *Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 252.

⁵ Mark Kermode, ‘Jaws, 40 Years On: “One of the Truly Great and Lasting Classics of American Cinema”,’ *Guardian*, 31 May 2015, www.theguardian.com/film/2015/may/31/jaws-40-years-on-truly-great-lasting-classics-of-america-cinema; McKee, *Story*, 253.

⁶ Brian Fanelli, ‘The Progressive Politics of Early Horror Cinema: Gender, Female Empowerment, and Sexuality,’ *Schuylkill Valley Journal*, 12 (Dec. 2008), www.svjlit.com/features-the-progressive-politics-of-early-horror-cinema-gender-female-empowerment-and-sexuality-svj-online-new-material-film-criticism-december-2018.

⁷ Robin Wood, ‘Introduction,’ in *American Nightmare: Essays on the Horror Film*, ed. Robin Wood and Richard Lippe (Toronto: Festival of Festivals, 1979), 17.

of films presented exclusively from the white gaze. While we have seen exceptions in popular horror films such as William Crain's *Blacula* (1972), William Girdler's *Abby* (1974), Rusty Cundieff's *Tales from the Hood* (1995), and more recently Jordan Peele's *Us* (2019) and *Nope* (2022), roles available to Black actors within horror have typically been confined to supporting characters. As stated by Robin R. Means Coleman, in the limited exposure given to Black actors in mainstream horror films, they have often been cast as subservient to white characters, often portraying voodoo priestesses, loyal servants or comic relief, and are ultimately represented as a 'racially coded inferior species.'⁸ Horror's traditionally unrepresentative nature has been addressed by director Jordan Peele, who has stated: 'I don't see myself casting a white dude as the lead in my movie ... I've seen that movie,' and it is often manifested in the 'Black character dies first' trope, a cliché that has been parodied in Wes Craven's *Scream 2* (1997) and Drew Goddard's *Cabin in the Woods* (2012).⁹

There are, however, examples of films that subvert this. In this paper I am going to focus on three films that address the issue of race in the contemporary United States of America. I will first look at George A. Romero's zombie horror film *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), before turning to Bernard Rose's portrayal of the urban myth *Candyman* (1992). After analysing these films, I conduct a deeper analysis of Jordan Peele's *Get Out* (2017), which, of the three selected films, bares its subtext most explicitly, thereby making it a fascinating headline case study. By exploring these films, I will demonstrate the ways in which music can be used to represent societal subtexts. With this, I point to the considerations that can be addressed when signifying a film's subtext through its score, and explore how the subtextual representation of racism has been portrayed musically, whether intentionally or not, in these films that encompass the civil rights era to the allegedly post-racial era of the contemporary United States. While my aim is not to suggest a universal trend towards an embracing of subtextual meaning in film score over this nearly fifty-year period, I intend to highlight a curious trend in filmmakers' and composers' mirroring of political subtexts. Ultimately, I propose that music can evoke a film's subtext just as strongly as the image can through the inverting of the traditional 'image/sound hierarchy.'¹⁰

Night of the Living Dead

When analysing the representation of racial politics in horror scores, it makes sense to begin with the first horror film to feature a Black lead protagonist: *Night of the Living Dead*. Released in 1968, during the civil rights era, *Living Dead* stands as an example of a horror film with an unambiguous social critique, as pointed out by Stephen Harper, who notes that it 'clearly and insistently engages with its contemporary social and political milieu.'¹¹ While Aaron Pinnix acknowledges that such criticism is 'subtle,' it has nevertheless inspired much discussion,

⁸ Robin R. Means Coleman, *Horror Noire: Blacks in American Horror Films from the 1890s to Present* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 45.

⁹ Chris Gardener and Seth Abramovitch, 'Jordan Peele on Making Movies after "Us": "I Don't See Myself Casting a White Dude as the Lead",' *Hollywood Reporter*, 26 Mar. 2019, www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/jordan-peeel-says-i-dont-see-myself-casting-a-white-dude-as-lead-us-1197021.

¹⁰ Scott Curtis, 'The Sound of Early Warner Bros. Cartoons,' in *Sound Theory, Sound Practice*, ed. Rick Altman (New York: Routledge, 1992), 194.

¹¹ Stephen Harper, 'Night of the Living Dead: Reappraising an Undead Classic,' *Bright Lights Film Journal* (Nov. 2005), brightlightsfilm.com/night-living-dead-reappraising-undead-classic/#.Y3bQFeRBxPZ.

with some exploring its representation of feminism and others viewing it as a parable of the Vietnam War and its effect on US society.¹² However, it is arguably the film's representation of race in the US that has inspired the most deliberation. Noël Carroll, for example, definitively proclaims the film as 'explicitly anti-racist as well as critical of the consumerism and viciousness of American Society,' and Pinnix has more recently discussed the film's racial subtext in relation to contemporary news coverage, arguing that 'by showing the experiences of an armed African-American protagonist ... the film inverts the news's vilification of African Americans.'¹³

Living Dead sees a group of survivors hiding inside a remote farmhouse following a zombie invasion. The inside of the house quickly becomes a microcosm of US society as Ben, the film's only Black character, comes into conflict with the domineering patriarchal figure, Cooper—thus entering into a power struggle that, in typical zombie film tradition, leads to the characters' ultimate demise. Despite Romero's protestations that the casting of Duane Jones as Ben was not intended as any kind of socio-political statement, the casting nevertheless lends the film an overt racial subtext, which makes this a curious case study, as it seems to actively shirk its reputation as a film with a specific racial subtext.¹⁴ This subtext is further suggested by the use of zombies, an undeniably racially coded monster given its origins in post-colonial Caribbean religious practices. This has been discussed by Kyle Bishop, who details the problematic racial politics of cinematic depictions of zombies in films like Victor Halperin's *White Zombie* (1932) and Jacques Tourneur's *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943), claiming that 'zombies thus represent an exaggerated model of colonial class / race segregation.'¹⁵

Living Dead's score consists of pre-composed orchestral music, taken from the Capitol Hi-Q library.¹⁶ For much of the film, the score adheres to contemporaneous horror score tropes, making use of shrill, sustained strings and brass stings, placing it firmly within the realm of films such as Terence Fisher's *Dracula: Prince of Darkness* (1966) and Sidney Salkow and Ubaldo B. Ragona's *The Last Man on Earth* (1964). However, in some instances sound editors Karl Hardman and Marilyn Eastman edited the music significantly by varying its tempo and adding reverb and echo.¹⁷ The naturalistic, organic instrumentation is therefore made alien, mimicking the film's

¹² Aaron Pinnix, 'Night of the Living Dead Dissects the News: Race, the 1967 riots, and "Dead Neighbours"', *JCMS: Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* 60 (Summer 2021): 115; Barry Keith Grant, 'Taking Back the Night of the Living Dead: George Romero, Feminism, and the Horror Film,' in *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant, 2nd ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015), 228–40; Sumiko Higashi, 'Night of the Living Dead: A Horror Film about the Horrors of the Vietnam Era,' in *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film*, eds. Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud (New Brunswick; London: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 175–88.

¹³ Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror, or Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York; London: Routledge, 2004), 198; Pinnix, 'Night of the Living Dead Dissects the News,' 115.

¹⁴ Joe Kane, 'How Casting a Black Actor Changed "Night of the Living Dead"', *The Wrap*, 13 Aug. 2010, www.thewrap.com/night-living-dead-casting-cult-classic-20545. While Romero long insisted on Jones's race not being a factor in the casting or conception of the film, critic Stuart Klawans suggests, 'There was no such thing as being color blind in 1967 and 1968. Not in a production that started in the wake of the Detroit and Newark riots, and pretty much finished with the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.' Klawans quoted in Brian Mann, 'When an Undead Apocalypse First Swept America in the "Night Of The Living Dead"', *NPR*, 23 Dec. 2018, www.npr.org/2018/12/03/672202431/when-an-undead-apocalypse-first-swept-america-in-the-night-of-the-living-dead.

¹⁵ Kyle Bishop, 'The Sub-Subaltern Monster: Imperialist Hegemony and the Cinematic Voodoo Zombie,' *The Journal of American Culture*, 31.2 (2008): 145–46.

¹⁶ David Hollander, *Unusual Sounds: The Hidden History of Library Music* (New York: Anthology, 2018), 14.

¹⁷ Hollander, *Unusual Sounds*, 14.

monsters: neither alive nor dead, yet recognisably once human, the zombies are soundtracked by a manipulated score that, while once organic, now belongs to a liminal space between the natural and unnatural. The era-appropriate sonic textures are undone during moments of obvious sound manipulation, the most notable instance occurring in the aftermath of a failed escape attempt as we are shown in graphic detail the zombies feasting on two of the would-be survivors (01:14:09). During this escape scene, Cooper attempts to lock Ben out of the farmhouse, perhaps seeing this as an opportunity to rid himself of the character with whom he has repeatedly clashed, and to whom he seems to be losing the battle for dominance. The mutilation of the traditional orchestra, long the subject of discussions regarding colonialism and white supremacy, can therefore be read as representative of the challenge that Ben poses to the patriarchal, white hegemony that Cooper represents. However, it is the film's use of silence that best exemplifies its assumed meaning regarding race, and when it is at its most powerful.

Most of *Living Dead's* score occurs as zombies are onscreen, leaving a large portion of the narrative to unfold without non-diegetic accompaniment. This absence of music contributes to the film's claustrophobic atmosphere and adds a sense of realism to the supernatural premise. This realism is a large contributing factor to the social critique exemplified in the power struggle between Ben and Cooper, and the seeming unease of female protagonist Barbra in being in such close proximity to Ben. Jordan Peele more recently commented on Barbra's unease, noting that it is never clarified 'how much she's terrified at the monsters on the outside or this man on the inside.'¹⁸ The conflict between Ben and Cooper culminates in Ben physically beating Cooper for locking him outside of the house (01:13:36). While this moment does feature a non-diegetic score, it is immediately removed once Ben punches Cooper. The moment is subsequently granted a gravity it may otherwise have lacked, seeming at this point less like an outlandish monster movie and more like a glimpse into the racial tensions that had persisted throughout the civil rights movement. It is subsequently presented as a stark depiction of the conflict between the hegemonic white society, and the Black Americans that this society had long oppressed.

Silence is a common feature of many horror films, and its use in film has been discussed extensively.¹⁹ Danijela Kulezic-Wilson has posited that the rarity of silence in many dramatic moments in film is 'because the silent tension ... could seem too real or too uncomfortable, music is there to help the audience cope with an unpleasant situation or remind them it's only a fantasy.'²⁰ In this case, however, silence seems to be used precisely *because* it makes the antagonism real; as the music is removed, we are denied the escapism that Kulezic-Wilson suggests, and are more able to draw parallels between the violence on screen and the violence that had played out throughout the 1960s and earlier.

While horror films have used silence as a means to intensify anxiety, often preceding a jumpscare, silence in *Living Dead* enhances its verisimilitude. This use of silence is typified

¹⁸ Jason Zinoman, 'Jordan Peele on a Truly Terrifying Monster: Racism,' *The New York Times*, 16 Feb. 2017, www.nytimes.com/2017/02/16/movies/jordan-peeel-interview-get-out.html.

¹⁹ See, for example, Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 56–58; Per F. Broman, 'Music, Sound, and Silence in the Films of Ingmar Bergman,' in *Music, Sound and Filmmakers: Sonic Style in Cinema*, ed. James Wierzbicki (New York: Routledge, 2012), 17; Danijela Kulezic-Wilson, 'The Music of Film Silence,' *Music and the Moving Image*, 2.3 (Oct. 2009): 26.

²⁰ Kulezic-Wilson, 'Music of Film Silence,' 25.

during the film's final scene as Ben, the only member of the group to survive the night, emerges from the cellar and is subsequently shot by a member of an all-white militia (01:33:17). Parallels can easily be drawn between the shocking conclusion of the film, and the actions of white supremacist groups active in the US at the time (led by the likes of Bull Connor). The relevance of Ben's death at the hands of the militia was highlighted by Renée Graham, who, writing for the *Boston Globe*, noted that it 'now evokes the callous killings of Philando Castile, Jordan Davis, Trayvon Martin, Rekia Boyd, and too many others whose only crime was to be Black in a nation that irrationally fears us.'²¹ The silence here subsequently underscores the reality of racial violence in the US, and echoes uncomfortably, even eerily, with the murder of Martin Luther King Jr in the same year as the film's release. This moment is followed by a montage of images of Ben's body being dragged outside and thrown upon a fire, resembling similarly distressing images from the civil rights era, and is accompanied by electronically manipulated orchestral strings. The sound used here again presents us with the liminal, not-quite-human orchestra, only now the score's inhumanity reflects the actions of the militia, and the lynching mobs that they, by extension, represent. The sound offers a clear repudiation of the visuals, thereby making its subtext clear: while Ben has been killed, it is the all-white mob that has lost its humanity. Aaron Pinnix draws a similar conclusion, as he compares the significance of the film's opening shot (a proud image of the American flag) with its final shot (Ben's body), which he claims '[presents] the film's broader message that America is in danger of destroying itself through racialized violence.'²²

Prior to *Living Dead*, such electronic sonic elements, such as the theremin and synthesisers, were not yet typical of the horror genre, and were more often reserved for science-fiction films such as Fred M. Wilcox's *Forbidden Planet* (1956).²³ While the unsettling nature of the score is perhaps appropriate for the scene's emotional impact, the unfamiliarity and unusual presence of electronic music within a horror film renders it highly audible. These unusual sonic palettes therefore draw attention to the score, evoking Steven Willemsen and Miklós Kiss's description of incongruous film music that 'immediately calls for attention.'²⁴ In this sense, the accompaniment over the treatment of Ben's body makes the film's subtext explicit, underscoring the horrific mistreatment of Black Americans during this period. The use of such obviously manipulated music evokes James Wierzbicki's discussion of sound effect and sound affect: 'hyper-real and surreal filmic sounds almost by definition are much more "meaningful" than the quotidian noises that constitute the bulk of any film's soundtrack.'²⁵ While Wierzbicki was referring to diegetic sound effects rather than non-diegetic score, I

²¹ Renée Graham, 'What "Night of the Living Dead" Taught Me about Race,' *Boston Globe*, 21 July 2017, www.bostonglobe.com/opinion/2017/07/21/what-night-living-dead-taught-about-race/hSDDXITitEwcdkHclOX9MO/story.html.

²² Pinnix, 'Night of the Living Dead Dissects the News,' 113.

²³ The rise in prominence of such electronic sonic textures in horror has been explored by Stephen Thrower. Thrower notes that *Night of the Living Dead's* use of an electronic score is 'deployed to suggest an unutterable horror,' and he discusses it as 'an artistic decision that would reverberate through the genre for years to come, setting the seal on the synthesizer as the instrument of choice for representing abject physical horror.' See Stephen Thrower, 'The Synth of Fear: Horror and Sci-Fi Films with Synthesizer Scores,' *Movies and Mania*, 1 Aug. 2014, moviesandmania.com/2014/08/01/horror-film-soundtracks-using-the-synthesizer-article.

²⁴ Steven Willemsen and Miklós Kiss, 'Unsettling Melodies: A Cognitive Approach to Incongruent Film Music,' *Acta Universitatis Sapientiae, Film and Media Studies*, 7.1 (2013): 170.

²⁵ Wierzbicki, 'Sound Effects/Sound Affects,' 165.

propose that his argument remains relevant here, given the highly effective and provocative scoring over the treatment of Ben's body.

Despite Romero's objections that the film was not intended as a racial commentary, *Living Dead* is regarded as a hugely significant film for its message of racial equality, as we can read into it an unequivocal condemnation of the racist violence rife in the 1960s. This messaging is clearly mirrored by the film's score in a fascinating way, as it remains congruous to the mood and generic convention throughout: its innovative use of sonic manipulation represents the ugliness of attitudes towards Ben, and the challenge he presents to the supremacy that Cooper assumes is inherently his. Its use of silence, meanwhile, offers the film a verisimilitude unobtainable with the use of music, and challenges us as viewers to confront the racist ideologies represented by Cooper and the militiamen.

Candyman

The racial underpinnings of *Night of the Living Dead* can also be found in Bernard Rose's 1992 film *Candyman*. Based on a short story originally set in Liverpool, Rose's adaptation changes the location to the Chicago housing project Cabrini-Green, and in doing so offers social commentary on racial inequality. *Candyman* tells the story of a white academic, Helen, as she researches the titular Candyman, who is supposedly haunting the predominately Black residents of Cabrini-Green. The juxtaposing of the squalor of Cabrini-Green with Helen, a middle-class academic, provides the basis for the film's overt racial subtext. This is explored in a sequence in which Helen's colleague details Candyman's backstory (00:28:53). It is here revealed that in 1890 Daniel Robitaille, the son of a former slave, was murdered after falling in love with a local white woman. His ashes were then spread over the future site of Cabrini-Green, and he has since terrorised the housing project in the guise of Candyman, slaying those who summon him.²⁶

Candyman's score, composed by Philip Glass, makes prominent use of organ, piano, and a vocal ensemble to create unrelenting tension throughout the film. This is exacerbated by Glass's minimalistic repetition, a technique that, as has been discussed elsewhere, can be highly effective in creating a tense ambience.²⁷ Glass therefore follows an established trend of incorporating minimalist elements into horror scores, a trend that can also be seen in the use of Mike Oldfield's *Tubular Bells* in William Friedkin's *The Exorcist* (1973); Goblin's scores for Dario Argento's *Profondo Rosso* (1970) and *Suspiria* (1977); and John Carpenter's scores for his films *Halloween* (1978) and *The Fog* (1980).

Glass elicits further horror trends through his use of organ, which, due to its associated gothic imagery, contributes to an ominous atmosphere that persists throughout the film, evoking works such as Carl Orff's 'O Fortuna' and the Toccata and Fugue in D minor, BWV 565, attributed to J.S. Bach, the latter of which has been used in numerous horror films.²⁸ *Candyman's* score is therefore situated within a longstanding horror tradition. The use of the organ in horror has been discussed by Julie Brown, who states that its 'immensity ... seems well suited to a

²⁶ It is revealed in a sequel, *Candyman: Farewell to the Flesh* (1995), that Candyman's real name was Daniel Robitaille, and while this analysis is solely focused on the original film, I will henceforth use his original name when discussing him prior to his murder.

²⁷ K. J. Donnelly, 'Hearing Deep Seated Fears: John Carpenter's *The Fog* (1980),' in *Music in the Horror Film: Listening to Fear*, ed. Neil Lerner (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), 161.

²⁸ See, for example, Rouben Mamoulian's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1931), Edgar G. Ulmer's *The Black Cat* (1934), and Terence Fisher's *The Phantom of the Opera* (1962).

horror film's sense of monumentality, and its desire both to scare and to create larger-than-life-characters.²⁹ In addition to Isabella van Elferen's notion that its allusion to graveyards further add to its spectral implications, the organ's ability to denote dread has encouraged its continued use within horror, and Glass is subsequently able to create a consistently disquieting atmosphere throughout the film.³⁰

As noted above, a large section of *Candyman* is set in Cabrini-Green, which at the time was known for its high crime rate and poverty, a fact referenced by Helen's colleague, who states that 'gangs hold this whole area hostage' (00:16:30).³¹ The housing projects are then introduced with an aerial shot of Helen's car driving through the neighbourhood, accompanied by an audible and ominous choir and organ arpeggios (00:17:10). In this establishing shot, *Candyman*'s score thus employs yet another classic horror trope: the fear and apprehension of isolated or dilapidated buildings, as also seen in *Dracula* (1931), *Psycho* (1960), and *The Shining* (1980). This trope is somewhat appropriate when considering *Candyman*'s terrorising of Cabrini-Green, therefore making it a literal haunted house. It could be argued that this trope is used as an ironic commentary on how urban housing projects are often maligned in the media. However, as the audience may typically understand the organ's timbres as a sinister genre trope, it instead hints at the danger of Helen's immediate surroundings rather than the complexities of the racial politics that the film's diegesis might suggest. This ultimately results in closely associating Cabrini-Green and its predominately Black inhabitants with the same danger associated with *Candyman*, a consequence that is exacerbated with Helen's numerous intimidating encounters with the residents. It must also be noted that on *Candyman*'s official soundtrack, the cue that introduces the housing project is entitled 'Cabrini Green,' therefore permanently associating the location with a level of apprehension analogous to *Dracula*'s castle or the Bates Motel.

At a more narrative level, there is also the consequence of sending mixed messages regarding the film's real antagonist: who should we be more fearful of, *Candyman* or his victims? The confusion is heightened when contrasting 'Cabrini Green' with the cue that introduces *Candyman* when Helen first sees him (00:43:21). This latter cue is substantially less unsettling, thereby seeming to answer our question: it is the residents who we should fear the most. This presents some audiovisual dissonance: being faced with the titular antagonist while the score's ethereal voices and hypnotically repetitive organ arpeggios lull Helen into a dream-like state wherein she is unable to react as *Candyman* encourages her to 'be my victim.' The evident subtext here is of *Candyman*'s hypnotic power over the victim of his infatuations, and while the film's racial subtext does not appear prevalent, it is exemplary of a persistent horror trope: the Black man coveting white women. In this, *Candyman* explicitly recirculates racial tropes that can be found in early Hollywood films such as D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915), Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack's *King Kong* (1933) and Jack Arnold's *Creature from the Black Lagoon* (1954), all of which feature the attempted kidnapping of a white woman either by a Black man or, in the latter two cases, a monster grotesquely

²⁹ Julie Brown, 'Carnival of Souls and the Organs of Horror,' in *Music in the Horror Film*, 5.

³⁰ Isabella van Elferen, *Gothic Music: The Sounds of the Uncanny* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2012), 38.

³¹ Ben Austen, 'The Towers Came Down, and With Them the Promise of Public Housing,' *The New York Times*, 6 Feb. 2018, www.nytimes.com/2018/02/06/magazine/the-towers-came-down-and-with-them-the-promise-of-public-housing.html.

representative of Black men.³² While some horror films may use allegory, in *Candyman* it is unambiguous as he explicitly says to Helen: 'all you have left is my desire for you' (01:14:26).

Nevertheless, some aspects of Glass's score do appear to mirror the film's racial subtext. One such example can be found in a further analysis of the representation of Cabrini-Green as a haunted house. Here, it is important to consider Kirsten Moana Thompson's discussion of spatiality within *Candyman*. Thompson discusses Cabrini-Green as the modern-day imitation of Robitaille's home, an 'unheimlich simulacra.'³³ In his work *Simulacra and Simulation*, Jean Baudrillard defines simulacra as a copy that has no original and 'no relation to any reality whatsoever.'³⁴ Using this description, it becomes evident that Candyman himself is a simulacrum: an imperfect imitation of Robitaille. The idea of Cabrini-Green and Candyman being simulacra is an important one, as the repetition inherent in simulacra becomes representative of the perpetual racial and economic inequalities that pervade US society and led to Robitaille's murder. Further, Helen's apparent ignorance of these inequalities are revealing of her position within the white middle class, therefore representing an 'unconscious racial privilege' that is equally recurrent in contemporary society.³⁵

This repetition is important when analysing *Candyman's* score, as the music's repetitive nature can be seen to represent these persistent racial inequities. Prior to composing for *Candyman*, Glass was well known for his work on documentary film. One such documentary was Errol Morris's *The Thin Blue Line* (1988), which details the wrongful imprisonment of a man following the murder of a policeman. It featured a score that Bill Nicholls described as:

[possessing] a tonality that is both hypnotic and repetitive [and] gives effective embodiment to the sense that the police and prosecution had circled around and around the events, repeating their own mantra of assumptions and convictions, only to let the truth slip through their fingers like the elusive spirit that hovers near but not quite in Glass's music.³⁶

Aspects of Nicholls's description of *The Thin Blue Line's* score can also be applied to the score for *Candyman*. Similar to *The Thin Blue Line's* score representing the police repeating the same mistakes, repetition within *Candyman* draws attention to systemic racism and economic inequality. This similarity is further evidenced when returning to Thompson's discussion of *Candyman*, wherein she states that Candyman's persistent haunting of Cabrini-Green suggests that 'Cabrini is a haunted trace of the racial politics of public policy.'³⁷ If we accept Thompson's assertion that Cabrini-Green symbolises the racist history of the US, it can subsequently be

³² This trope has been explored by David Pilgrim, who discusses the 'brute caricature [that] portrays black men as innately savage.' Pilgrim provides examples of this trope dating from nineteenth-century literature to late-twentieth-century films and television, and notes that the 'crime most often mentioned in connection with the black brute was rape, specifically the rape of a white woman.' David Pilgrim, 'The Brute Caricature,' *Free State University: Jim Crow Museum*, www.ferris.edu/HTMLS/news/jimcrow/brute/homepage.htm.

³³ Kirsten Moana Thompson, *Apocalyptic Dread: American Film at the Turn of the Millennium* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 69.

³⁴ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 6.

³⁵ Thompson, *Apocalyptic Dread*, 72.

³⁶ Bill Nichols, 'Preface,' in *Music and Sound in Documentary Film*, ed. Holly Rogers (New York: Routledge, 2015), x.

³⁷ Thompson, *Apocalyptic Dread*, 69.

argued that associating such ominous music with the housing projects becomes much more appropriate, for it is not the housing projects and their inhabitants being demonised, but the systemic racism that Cabrini signifies.

While the music in *Candyman* can evidently be read as paralleling the film's racial politics, when considering the apparent vilification of Cabrini-Green it seems unlikely that these parallels were deliberate. Ultimately, *Candyman's* score does not overtly address the film's subtext of systemic racial inequality, and it is only with a hermeneutic analysis that this representation is revealed. Yet, undertaking this analysis exposes numerous ways in which the film's subtext is signified and can be read as either positive reinforcement of the subtextual narrative regarding perpetual racial inequality, or complicit in the demonising of lower-income Black Americans and their residences. Whichever reading one subscribes to, it will prove interesting to counter this example with a score that does not appear to entertain such ambiguity, neither in its diegesis or *mise-en-bande*: Jordan Peele's *Get Out*.

Get Out

Get Out tells the story of a young black man, Chris Washington, visiting the parents of his white girlfriend, Rose Armitage. Upon arrival at the Armitage family home, Chris is greeted with what Krin Gabbard might describe as a 'permissible racism': seemingly innocuous comments from Rose's father about his wish to vote for Barack Obama for a third time, and greeting Chris in African American Vernacular English.³⁸ While Chris initially overlooks this behaviour, he soon discovers the Armitage's plan to auction him to one of their neighbours in order to implant their brains into his body and co-opt his physical attributes.

While ostensibly a horror film, *Get Out* functions as a social critique of the racist attitudes that remain endemic amongst the white middle class during what Peele describes as 'the post-racial lie' of the Obama presidency, and addresses issues such as slavery, police harassment, and racist taboos surrounding 'miscegenation'.³⁹ While the previous films I have explored dealt with typical undead horror antagonists, whether zombies or poltergeist-like apparitions, *Get Out's* monsters are, as Laure Bakare wrote in *The Guardian*, 'middle-class white liberals ... [and exposes their] attitude, an arrogance which in the film leads to a horrific final solution.'⁴⁰ As such, *Get Out* deviates from my previous case studies as its subtext becomes undeniable, thereby making it worthy of deeper analysis at this juncture.

Following a brief prologue, the film's title sequence offers the first use of non-diegetic music (00:03:36). The aural accompaniment here, 'Sikiliza Kwa Wahenga,' begins as an ominous bluegrass instrumental cue before whispered voices are introduced singing in Swahili. The timbre and reverb of the voices create a supernatural and mystical feel that is exacerbated when understanding the translated lyrics: 'Brother / Listen to the ancestors / Run / You need to run far / Listen to the truth / Brother / Listen to the ancestors / Run, run / To save yourself.' For composer Michael Abels, these disembodied voices 'represent the departed slaves and lynching victims. They are trying to reach Chris, the lead character, and speak to him

³⁸ Krin Gabbard, 'Race and Reappropriation: Spike Lee Meets Aaron Copland,' *American Music*, 18 (Winter 2000): 373.

³⁹ Rebecca Keegan, 'Jordan Peele on the "Post-Racial Lie" that inspired *Get Out*,' *Vanity Fair*, 30 Oct. 2017, www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2017/10/jordan-peeel-get-out-screening.

⁴⁰ Lanre Bakare, 'Get Out: The Film That Dares to Reveal the Horror of Liberal Racism in America,' *Guardian*, 28 Feb. 2017, www.theguardian.com/film/2017/feb/28/get-out-box-office-jordan-peeel.

from beyond.⁴¹ While film music could typically be understood as directed to its audience—instructing them how to feel or giving clues as to the scene’s geographic location—‘Sikiliza’ addresses Chris directly, therefore situating him within its gaze, foreshadowing the dangers that await him, and closely associating the instrumentation with him. With the score clearly directed at and identified with Chris, and with the fact that the instrumentation diverges from Western orchestral practice—which the Armitages perhaps represent, as will be discussed below—he is positioned as an outsider to the world that he is about to enter.

In addition to these African voices, ‘Sikiliza’ features a kora, a West African harp, which is used as the main melodic instrument prior to the introduction of the voices. This instrumentation is juxtaposed with the bluegrass tradition that it follows, a genre with strong associations with southern US states that, in turn, have associations of slavery and racism.⁴² Consequently, the cue presents two competing timbres: the African-inspired instrumentation and vocals, and the southern state-associated genre. In using African instrumentation in a genre with historical racial connotations, albeit one that African Americans have also influenced, ‘Sikiliza’ neatly mirrors the complexity and intertwining of race in the US, drawing attention to the competing influence of African identity and white supremacy. The notion of this cue highlighting Chris’s position as an outsider is therefore problematised, as the cue’s genre simultaneously highlights Chris’s identity as an American.

I previously identified ‘Sikiliza’ as the film’s first instance of non-diegetic music. This notion at first appears indisputable: it is not clearly emanating from any source within the diegesis, while, considering how little action is unfolding on the screen, it is unlikely to be acousmatic. Though if we are to understand the cue as speaking directly to Chris, as Abels suggests, it must therefore be emanating from within the film’s diegesis. It is at this point that the dichotomous nature of diegetic/non-diegetic is no longer adequate, and a consideration of Ben Winters’ ‘Non-Diegetic Fallacy’ is necessary. For Winters, describing a film’s score as simply non-diegetic ‘[denies] it an active role in shaping the course of onscreen events.’⁴³ As we have seen, in addressing Chris, ‘Sikiliza’ attempts to play an active role in the diegesis and therefore, following Winters’ assertion, cannot be dismissed as non-diegetic. In circumstances in which the term ‘non-diegetic’ is insufficient, Winters offers the term ‘intra-diegetic’, citing Daniel Frampton’s concept of a ‘filmind,’ wherein ‘it is the film that is steering its own (dis) course.’⁴⁴ Winters suggests that an intra-diegetic space allows for music to ‘play an active role in the diegesis while still appearing to remain “unheard” by its characters.’⁴⁵ Although Chris remains oblivious to the warnings issued to him by ‘Sikiliza,’ since the cue is actively attempting to alter the film’s narrative, it appears appropriate to interpret it as intra-diegetic, thus placing it *within* the film’s diegesis. Winters further states that:

it is not whether or not the characters can ‘hear’ music that dictates whether the music is part of the fictional world ... but whether the music appears to exist in the time and

⁴¹ Duncan Harrison, ‘How Composer Michael Abels Produced the Chilling Score for *Get Out*,’ *Crack*, 16 Mar. 2017, crackmagazine.net/article/long-reads/composer-michael-abels-produced-chilling-score-get.

⁴² Allen Farmelo, ‘Another History of Bluegrass: The Segregation of Popular Music in the United States, 1820–1900,’ *Popular Music & Society*, 25.1 (2001): 179–80.

⁴³ Winters, ‘Non-Diegetic Fallacy,’ 224.

⁴⁴ Winters, ‘Non-Diegetic Fallacy,’ 237; Daniel Frampton, *Filmosophy* (London: Wallflower Press, 2006), 7.

⁴⁵ Winters, ‘Non-Diegetic Fallacy,’ 243.

narrative space of the diegesis, or whether it appears to 'narrate' at a temporal distance from that space.⁴⁶

If, as I suggest, it can be stated that the music exists in the film's present, within the narrative diegesis, these voices cannot know of the exact perils awaiting Chris. This therefore suggests that these voices seek to warn Chris of the dangers posed not just by the Armitage family, but by the seemingly safe, white American elite more broadly. In embracing this assertion, 'Sikiliza' encapsulates *Get Out's* message of addressing the racism that remains prevalent within liberal, left-leaning sections of society.

Though labelling 'Sikiliza Kwa Wahenga' as intra-diegetic appears justified, the score overall does not remain in this capacity for long, later reverting to a more conventional non-diegetic realm. One such non-diegetic cue is 'The House' (13.03). This cue is heard as Chris and Rose approach the Armitage's house, and features high, sustained strings and a harp motif, creating an ominous atmosphere that clearly instructs the audience to be wary of this new environment. In building this tension, the score mirrors Chris's apprehension of the greeting that he will receive at the Armitage's house, something that he voiced to Rose during their journey. In this way, the score appears to have transitioned from intra-diegetic, where it addressed Chris directly, into a more traditional non-diegetic realm, expressing Chris's emotions but ultimately suggesting that what we are seeing is not as welcoming as it may seem. The score thus remains undoubtedly positioned from Chris's perspective, revealing his inner feelings and evoking Guido Heldt's discussion of the 'internal focalization', a term borrowed from Gérard Genette, wherein a character becomes 'the focal point of the narration's attention.'⁴⁷In instances of internal focalisation, the narrator, or in this case, the non-diegetic score, presents a 'representation or intimation of a character's mental states or process,' and can be understood 'as an emanation of something diegetic.'⁴⁸The audiovisuality of focalisation is manifested not only in the score's representation of Chris's emotional state, but also in the way that he is framed as the main focus of many shots, even in scenes where he is a quiet spectator. Such an example can be seen during an exchange with a police officer after Rose hits a deer with her car. Here, while Rose and the police officer discuss the incident in the background, the *mise-en-scène* sees Chris foregrounded, facing the camera accompanied by a sinister harp motif. Following this, we can understand not just the score but the diegesis as a whole as a focalisation of Chris's mental state, as his apprehension builds prior to anything overly sinister taking place.

A similar instance occurs in a later party sequence, where the Armitage's guests make several inappropriate references to Chris's race (00:40:42). While the scene is narratively portrayed as comedic, the music creates an audiovisual dissonance with a highly unsettling score. With Chris as the focalisation of the diegesis, both the score and his and Rose's physical reactions to these comments show us that the events are not at all amusing for him; however, as we later find out, Rose's reaction is clearly a pretense, thereby further evidencing that the *mise-en-scène* is presented from Chris's perspective, as Rose's internal score would likely be far less sinister than the one with which we are presented. The cue, as with most of the score

⁴⁶ Winters, 'Non-Diegetic Fallacy,' 236.

⁴⁷ Heldt, *Levels of Narration*, 120.

⁴⁸ Heldt, *Levels of Narration*, 127.

thus far, therefore acts as an overt foreshadowing of the dangers awaiting Chris. In keeping with convention, the scoring in this scene features traditional orchestral strings, yet they are embellished with the kora. Much like 'Sikiliza,' 'Garden Party' presents two competing timbres: the African instrumentation of the kora and the Western art music-inspired strings, paralleling the contrasting identities represented by Chris and the apparently unwitting, ideologically antagonistic party guests.

'The House' evidently foreshadows impending dangers, but the instrumentation nevertheless remains paramount when considering *Get Out's* subtextual narrative. With the use of orchestral instrumentation, 'The House' evokes the Western art music tradition, often criticised for being exclusively white, European, and male (the conventional environment of classical music, the concert hall, has been described as a 'place where middle-class white people can feel safe together').⁴⁹ When understanding Western art music in this context, it is easy to deduce that its use in *Get Out* represents the white, liberal elite that form the film's antagonists; in the case of 'The House,' on the other hand, the implication becomes that Chris is entering their territory. Again, the use of this instrumentation to create an unsettling atmosphere suggests that this community is not the trustworthy ally that they initially seem.

This use of instrumentation and foreshadowing is standard fare in horror scores, and can be seen here through Abels's employing of the harp. The use of harp in 'The House' is reminiscent of the 1933 film *King Kong*, which, as noted above, is notable for its dubious racial subtext. Its overture notwithstanding, the first example of non-diegetic music heard in *King Kong* features arpeggios played on a harp, accompanied by sustained orchestral strings, and occurs as the protagonists approach Skull Island (00:19:49). As described by Claudia Gorbman:

The music initiates us into the fantasy world, the world where giant apes are conceivable, the underside of the world of reason. It helps to hypnotise the spectator, bring down defences that could be erected against this realm of monsters, tribesmen, jungles, violence. This association of music and the irrational predominates throughout the genres of horror, science fiction, and fantasy, as a catalyst in the textual process of slipping in and out of the discourse of realism.⁵⁰

The presence of monsters, tribesmen, and jungles notwithstanding, this description remains apt for *Get Out* as the harp encourages the audience to immerse themselves in the diegesis. While the Armitage's ultimate plan for Chris may seem outlandish, upon entering this fantasy world anything could be possible.

I have thus far focused on *Get Out's* composed score, but attention should also be paid to the use of pre-existing popular songs. The first instance is 'Run Rabbit Run' by Flanagan and Allen, heard from a car's radio during the prologue, where a masked figure follows a black man, Andre, through a suburban neighbourhood, thus creating significant audiovisual dissonance given the song's comedic intent and recording by a 1930s London-based comedy duo. The point of audition in this scene is with Andre; the music becomes louder and quieter depending on how close he is to the car. Andre is thus the audience's avatar in this scene, as we experience the diegesis from his perspective. The choice of song here is highly evocative:

⁴⁹ Melissa C. Dobson and Stephanie E. Pitts, 'Classical Cult or Learning Community? Exploring New Audience Members' Social and Musical Responses to First-time Concert Attendance,' in *The Ethnomusicology of Western Art Music*, ed. Laudan Nooshin (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), 72.

⁵⁰ Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 79.

Andre becomes the rabbit as he is stalked through the streets, something of which the driver of the car is no doubt aware. It is also interesting to note that some scholars have cited the racial implications within the *Rabbit* series of novels by John Updike, the first of which was titled *Rabbit, Run*, in an apparent reference to the song.⁵¹

Another song heard is '(I've Had) The Time of My Life' by Bill Medley and Jennifer Warnes, heard diegetically as Rose browses the internet (01:28:38). This scene occurs as Chris is being held captive in the Armitage's basement. The use of such an uplifting song therefore showcases the indifference of Rose—and consequently the hegemony that she represents—to the continued racial injustices in which she is complicit. It is also curious to note that this song was originally used in the film *Dirty Dancing* (1987), which has been criticised as a 'film about social divisions [yet] almost entirely cast with white people'; *Dirty Dancing* culminates in the coupling of two white leads, following a dance routine to the song.⁵² We can therefore surmise that Rose's appreciation of the song perhaps derives, albeit subconsciously, from the white, heteronormative relationship that it signifies, and its occurrence thus represents the hegemonic societal taboo regarding 'miscegenation'.

Michael Abels's score for *Get Out* clearly reflects the film's social critique in several ways, most notably through its use of competing African and European timbres. Whereas the previous films examined made extensive and almost exclusive use of traditional horror film instrumentation, *Get Out* veers from this conventional approach by combining African and Western art music instrumentation. *Get Out* thus stands out as a prime example of how racial politics can be expressed through a score, with the fusing of contrasting musical styles.

Conclusion

The analysis of the films discussed in this article has demonstrated various ways in which subtext in film music, whether diegetic, non-diegetic or within the liminal space between, can be read. The three scores each offer fascinating examples of how political and societal undertones can be relayed, whether intentionally or not. It perhaps comes as little surprise that *Get Out*'s score seems to exhibit its film's subtext most explicitly, given that, of the three, this film conveys its message most overtly, to the extent that its subtext largely becomes text. Further, this is the only film of the three analysed that was helmed by a Black director and features a Black composer (although, it must be stressed that these three films are not entirely representative of all horror films that engage with racism as their subject matter, whether implicitly or explicitly).

While it may be tempting to ascribe value judgements to these films based on how much their scores mirror the racism, or indeed consequences of longstanding systemic racism portrayed on screen, it is important to note that such conclusions are in no way my intention in exploring these case studies. Rather, I hope to have highlighted the multiple ways in which we can analyse a film's score as an aural representation of the societal and political messages

⁵¹ Edward M. Jackson, 'Rabbit Is Racist,' *CLA Journal*, 28.4 (June 1985): 444; Marshall Boswell, 'The Black Jesus: Racism and Redemption in John Updike's "Rabbit Redux",' *Contemporary Literature*, 39.1 (Spring 1998): 100.

⁵² Alissa Wilkinson, 'Dirty Dancing Was Expected to Flop. But Nobody Puts Baby in a Corner,' *Vox*, 19 Aug. 2017, www.vox.com/culture/2017/8/19/16143228/dirty-dancing-anniversary-movie-of-week-swayze-grey.

that are largely left unsaid in the American horror film. As such, I have attempted to posit a use for film music that is often overlooked in film music analysis. Of course, this article offers only a brief glimpse into the countless ways that this analytical framework could be employed; however, as alluded to above, and in line with Robin Wood's assertion of horror as an inherently progressive genre, many films explore a wide range of socio-political subtexts, each providing their own opportunities to broaden the discussion presented here. If used to explore a wider range of genres and messages, the possibilities for further research are endless.

About the Author

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